

# **“Cultural Difference” in Russia’s Industrial Cities: The Politics of Trade, Employment, and Emotions**

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“The city is a place of difference and that include different interests. A policy that does not square up to that will not address the underlying problems” (Amin, Massey, and Thrift, 2000, 4)

## **Introduction: Cultures, Racism, and Neoliberalism**

This paper examines popular attitudes towards cultural difference in Russian cities vis-à-vis changes in the normative frameworks by which we come to access city conflicts<sup>1</sup>. Through a case study of the “Gazeta.ru” and other Internet forums, as well as in-depth interviews, it traces judgments, systems of value, and rhetorical devices through which people make sense of their co-existence with those who, they believe, belong to different cultures. Urban cultural difference is examined here in four ways. First, difference is a given of the urban condition. “Otherness” is something people always co-exist with in cities. Its presence assumes a new significance in a globalized world where far-flung peoples are brought into contact with one another in cities. Second, cultural difference is a value that needs to be democratically protected. A strong body of political and geographical work has pursued approaches that may benefit minority groups and promote cultural diversity as a political ideal (Kymlicka, 1995; Bennet, 2001; Stevenson, 2003; Benhabib, 2002, 2005; Tomasi, 2001; Ruble, 2005; Juteau and Harzig, 2002, Parekh, 2000; Sokolovski, 1997; Podlesnyi, 2003). Third, cultural difference, whether it is urban or otherwise, is often perceived—by politicians and lay people alike—as a hindrance to national cohesion and assimilation into a dominant culture as a remedy for it (Li, 2003; Brug and Verkuyten, 2007; Laforcade, 2006; Kundhani, 2007). And finally, cultural differences are closely intertwined with social differences, so that, on one hand, their negotiations often mask the struggle for recourse among different social groups (Bourdieu, 1984, 169-75), on the other, their perception by people is often “sifted through” existing social disparities. It is with the locality of a town or a city that these perceptions and experiences interact, so that ethnic and class relations intersect, producing spatially specific forms of inequality (Peach, 1975, 1979, 1995, 2000; Massey and Denton, 1988).

Changes in the ways culture has been used in political struggles, the world economy, city branding, and the negotiations of identity also need to be taken into consideration. According to the American anthropologists, John and Jean Komaroff, (2004, 108)

Peoples across the planet have taken to invoking it, to signifying themselves with reference to it, to investing it with an authority, a determinacy, a superorganic unity of which even

the most conservative anthropologist would be wary. Culture, now capitalized in both senses of the term, has come to provide the language, the Esperanto, of difference spoken in the active voice.

One especially disturbing consequence of this growing “capitalization of culture” is the way it now figures in the so-called “new racist” discourse (Amin, 2004; Balibar, 2007; Nash, 2003), for which a replacement of biology-based claims with culture-based claims for one people’s superiority is characteristic. As the Swedish anthropologist, Peter Hervik, contends (2004, 151).

The core of this new racism is the shift of rhetoric from ‘race’ to a focus on ‘culture’ — first uttered by the political right but now used widely on the political spectrum[...]People of diverse cultural backgrounds are explicitly acknowledged as being of equal worth. The world is divided into national territories to which ‘cultures’ belong ‘naturally.’ If members of a certain ‘culture’ are found outside its ‘natural’ place, the relations between native and newcomers (locals and migrants or refugees) will be antagonistic. Racist discrimination is increasingly justified by means of exclusive cultural difference.

Hervik notes that in some European countries it is the people’s and the politicians’ preoccupation with their country’s self-image that prevents them from acknowledging on-going ethnic and racial discrimination. My argument is that it is the aggressive promotion, both domestically and internationally, of the image of Russia as a “tough” and independent world power that further amplifies interethnic distortions and conflicts. A popular slogan, “Putin has raised Russia from its knees,” is understood by many people as a guide to the ways newcomers should be treated — exploitatively and arrogantly.

In April 2007, Levada-Center conducted a poll in Moscow (n =500) asking people to name a few of the most troublesome city problems. The answers were compared with similar data obtained in 2003. In 2003, 21 per cent of the respondents cited traffic jams as bothersome; in 2007, this increased to 56 per cent. The influx of newcomers/migrants bothered 24 per cent of people in 2003 and 43 per cent in 2007. These two problems outweighed whole range of others (I list them here in a descending order): the cost of utilities, drug abuse, criminal activities, a lack of affordable housing, environmental problems, insufficient medical care, beggars and homeless on the streets, bad sanitary conditions, insufficient public transportation, crumbling housing, corruption, unemployment, bad roads, bad social care addressing children problems, closing of industrial enterprises, inefficiency of police, inefficiency of the Moscow government, bad school system, delayed salaries, bad street lighting, the threat of terrorism, irregular water and heating supply, etc. (The Problems of Big City, 2007)

Note that migrants are portrayed in that poll as the “problem,” as something that, together with traffic jams, reduces the likelihood that Moscow and its long-time residents will open up the potential for comfortable living. Russian citizens as a whole show a similar attitude. According to a more recent poll (conducted last fall by WTSIOM), 51 per cent of Russians believe that limits should be put on the entrée of those from “close abroad” (i.e., former socialist republics) since it increases the competition in the job market. At the same time, 51 per cent believe that Russia should be a country in which all people have equal rights and opportunities. Commenting on this, the director of WTSIOM, Valerii Fedorov, said that a high percentage of those who are against migration can be explained as a generation gap. “Those for whom ‘friendship of the peoples’ was an important ideological statement become older while younger people are prone to xenophobia because intercultural contradictions as well as social inequality grow” (Chamraev, 2008). There is, indeed, a general understanding that, by virtue of being comprised of numerous “nationalities”<sup>2</sup>, Russia was a multinational state and that, in Soviet times, there emerged a

successful tradition of various peoples' co-existence in the framework of an ethnically diverse society.

However, there is a sense in which the surges of neonationalism and xenophobia that are taking place in Russia should be explained not only by a generation gap, a lack of people who were subjected to the indoctrination into the "friendship of people" discourse, and by a growing sociocultural fragmentation. They also should be put in the wider framework of the changing configurations of cultural, social, and political forces currently at work in the world. Under the conditions of neoliberal globalization that include the coexistence of the nation-state with larger global forces and the dominance of neoliberal ideology, new intensities of interaction and interconnections become characteristic of cities (Massey, Allen, and Pile, 1999). As a result, many people in the United States and in Western and Eastern Europe show a considerable degree on xenophobia. "The popular perception that immigration is 'out of control' has gathered steam throughout the industrialized world, provoking a backlash against relatively liberal admissions policies" (Cornelius et al. 2004, as quoted in Salehyan and Rosenblum, 2008, 104).

There are at least two factors that seriously complicate this matter in Russia. First, the "open door" migration policy of the government is combined with restrictive citizenship policies. This prompts all interested parties (from developers to the local police) to turn migrants into both a source of cheap, sometimes slave, labor and the subjects of severe racial profiling. Second, a parallel backlash is directed both to the putatively liberal entry policies and to the liberal ideology, which is increasingly perceived as "alien." According to popular understanding, it was "imposed" on Russians by the politicians who, in the early 1990s, developed liaisons with Westerners, conducted shock therapy to the detriment of the Russian people, worked hard to spread the ideology of "political correctness" and contributed to the "chaos of Yeltsin's era." Many commentators blame the media and "liberals" for contributing to the fragmentation of Russian society and "betraying the interests" of the Russians (Kara-Murza, 2007), especially when it comes to the media rendering of ethnic conflicts (Sokolov-Mitrich, 2007). The irony is that, while "liberal" has turned into a problematic label that has a lot of negative connotations and liberal ideology has lost popularity, the actual liberalization of people's life choices and lifestyles is unfolding swiftly. To give just one example. The last census that was conducted in Russia in 2002, was based on, first, anonymity of participation; second, on a person's self-definition of his or her ethnic belonging; and third, on the removal from the questionnaire a question about one's religion and thus on the state's distancing itself from matters of faith and religion (Filippova, Arel, and Guseff, 2003). Another example is consumerism. Citizens are constantly prompted to acquire material possessions or to engage in other projects of self-actualization, via advertising and a wide choice of consumer credit. Although this hinders substantive communal connections and leads to reducing the individual autonomy to consumer choice, the degree of personal autonomy that many achieved during the last two decades is remarkable.

Yet these tendencies should be seen in light of the growing importance of one's publicly stated approval of the state's policy and the narrowing of the range of possibilities for achieving success apart from either working in the raw materials industry or joining the "cadres" of government officials. As I wrote elsewhere, what takes place is "the ongoing conversion of the "seats" in the present hierarchy of governmental power into enviable pieces of real estate that are camouflaged from time-to-time by pompous nationalistic spectacles" (Trubina, 2006, 162). Neoliberal tendencies reveal themselves in "outsourcing" of social policies under the pretext of introducing market rationality to all spheres of life and in producing a type of subject similar to what the American political theorist Wendy Brown calls the "undemocratic citizen" (2006, 692):

This is the citizen who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even of a liberal sort; the citizen who expects neither truth nor accountability in governance and state actions; the citizen who is not distressed by exorbitant concentrations of political and economic power, routine abrogations of the rule of law, or distinctly undemocratic formulations of national purpose at home and abroad.

This description of the unfortunate outcome of the American “nightmare of de-democratization,” as Brown puts it, seems equally relevant for the present-day Russian political situation. One of course can object to this parallel by referring to the long-time liberal political tradition in the United States, as opposed to “chronic” Russian authoritarianism, which is different from liberalism because “it regards its subjects’ capacity for action as subordinate to the expectations of obedience”(Dean, 1999, p. 9). In any case, it is obvious that enduring political concerns (equality, for one) and conventional ways of analyzing city conflicts should be reformulated in light of the new realities of the fragmented society, the crisis of civic activities, and the growth of individualism.

The dilemma of the normative and descriptive dimensions of an analysis of the present globalized urban reality has particular significance for post-socialist intellectuals like myself, insofar as the post-socialist studies following the 1990s radical changes continue to do a better job of providing thick descriptions of on-going social changes than of positively re-imagining our (now increasingly common) reality. In fact, it is exactly because that reality has become globalized (as do ideas), it is more and more difficult to come up with positive imaginings. If all the great ideologies of the twentieth century (including Socialism) possessed this inspirational power, globalism strikingly lacks it. As Ulrich Beck puts it, “The new neoliberal crusaders preach: ‘You must become streamlined, downsize, flexibilize and get on Internet.’ But that precisely does not produce a new feeling of belonging, solidarity, or identity. The opposite is true: the free market ideology undermines democratic politics and democratic identities” (Beck, 2002, 40). At the same time, while the universalistic ideas of the good life and peaceful coexistence continue, in principle, to enrich human imagination, researchers need to pay more careful attention to the transformations that the normative notions themselves are currently undergoing. It is too often that, within the broad social discourse, “normative” figures not as ideas one should pursue but as things and experiences one should have, and “ideal” refers to a home or a car. However, while a great deal of popular culture, including the lifestyle industry, rotates around the issues of good and bad, intellectuals, who are in principle capable of having an impact on people’s normative ideas, seem to have withdrawn from promoting them. Put simply, it is the frames of reference and practical purposes of the “new cultural entrepreneurs” (including the ones who are busy aestheticizing current and past governmental policies in Russia) that are at work in many strata of society when it comes to matters of human worth and cultural taste.

Regardless of how one defines communities today—by place, ethnicity, religion, or social status—the globalized influx of various divergences into cities makes pertinent the search for strategies for dealing with difference that do not limit themselves to issues of national identity but go beyond it. This search is complicated by the holistic, or essentialist understandings of ethnic cultures as coherent and bounded wholes. What happens when such understanding of one’s own culture becomes publicly contested? Are there ways for differences to be productively negotiated? What sense can be made of people’s direct exchanges regarding deep disagreements about their ethnicity-related experiences? The remainder of this paper suggests ways in which a research agenda about the strategies used by ordinary people to draw boundaries with people who are different from them might be developed, and the following sections outline some potential trajectories.

## Urban Ethnic Conflict

In the last few years, in Moscow, in Russia's southern city of Stavropol, in the northwestern town of Kondopoga, and in some other places clashes between Slavs and Caucasians took place. In Moscow, the antforeigner violence exploded in winter and spring of 2008 when members of the right-wing political movements "Slavyanskii Soyuz," "Natsional-Sotsialisticheskoe Obshchestvo," and others attacked non-Russians, especially those from the former Soviet Asian republics. After the leaders of neo-Nazi groups were arrested in the winter 2007-2008, a new wave of a street violence took place. At the same time, many right-wing candidates in municipal and federal elections were refused registration and thus pushed out of the field of legal political activity. A growing street extremism can thus be seen as the outcome of Kremlin's successful erasure of all political opposition, including right-wing and nationalist (Sysoev, 2008). Instead, Putin recently said to Angela Merkel "But (Medvedev) is no less of a Russian nationalist—in a positive way—than me. And I don't think it will be easier for our partners to deal with him." Note that in some cases in the past (between Russia and Georgia, for instance) it was the character of the personal relationships of the president with the leaders of new independent states that defined Russian migration policy (Gradirovsky, 2004).

The endorsement of nationalism and ethnocentrism by the country's now-prime-minister is combined with, first, his setting himself as an example of how to be a good nationalist (who engages at times in heavily jargonized tough talk) and, second, with appropriations of any traces of civil unrest by political parties. The whole range of the staged political events (like those preceding the last presidential elections) and numerous cases of hiring the necessary number of rally participants can be added to this picture. The more significant the alienation between the current Kremlin administration and people becomes, the more "staged" the public sphere becomes and the more indifferent the masters of political show-business grow to what people really think and feel. Political theorists usefully remind us that ethnocentrism is linked not only to isolationism but it is also strongly connected to the endorsement of hierarchy (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987, 1108, quoted in Rathbun, 2007). One of the consequences of "strengthening the power vertical" that Putin completed is that, while hierarchical distribution of resources and, in general, hierarchical, status- and power-oriented thinking currently prevails, equality as a political orientation seems to have completely disappeared from the political agenda. At the same time, in a society in which the social-political discourse of equality was dominant for several decades, it is unlikely that the social and political hierarchy will ever be perceived as related to one's worth and achievement. Rather, it is seen by the majority as being "artificially imposed or *enacted* by interested parties and, as a result, accords benefits to incumbents of privileged positions in a way that is largely independent of their individual qualities" (Gould, 2002, 1147).

There is not a political force that would consider as its realistic goal "reducing hierarchy by taking material resources from the rich and giving them to the poor" (Rathbun, 2007, 385)—by non-revolutionary means. Significantly, whenever the issues of taxation or redistribution of wealth are discussed, people habitually notice that the "redistribution" will end up in some high-ranking official's pocket. These workings of power are not dissimilar from feudal ones: there is a growing importance of one's loyalty to the president, a regional governor, a mayor, or the head of a corporation, and one's astute sense of subordination and expectations to receive compensations in return for being loyal (Trubina, 2006). As a result, questioning the hierarchical order becomes an unpopular activity, although in everyday conversation, grumbling about "corrupted officials" and "wealthy ones" can be heard quite often. This seeming "naturalness" of an unshakable social hierarchy and the obvious total failure of Socialist-egalitarian ideas lead to

the popular belief that newcomers and migrants, by virtue of their belonging to “less developed” ethnic groups and because this is “our” land, are considered as being lower socially and culturally and thus open to exploitation and distancing. This is not to say that individuals who are not satisfied with their standing in society always try to compensate for their own failures and humiliation by unjustly treating others (although sometimes this is exactly the case). Rather, the examples of fantastic wealth and high status acquired by some are so prominent in the public discourse that it prompts people striving to achieve success to use all available means. The unjust treatment of subordinates is a strategy widely used in many strata of society, where anyone, regardless of ethnicity, can be, in some sense, “other.” At the same time, non-Russians provoke hostility and suspicion because they are not “grateful to us for our hospitality,” because they “don’t obey our rules,” or, as one of my informants put it, “I just don’t want them to be a part of my life.” It hardly makes sense to point out the numerous inconsistencies of such reasoning. Suffice is to say that while people generally acknowledge the need for national integration (achieved largely through assimilation of the migrants), they maintain a strong reluctance to practically engage in the work of integration. For instance, many are concerned with the growing number of non-Russian students in high schools and, when there is a chance, choose an ethnically homogeneous one. Similarly, the desire to live among “predictable” peoples is characteristic not only for gentrified and affluent people but for the majority of population, resulting in increasing segregation.

All this poses a challenge to the urban scholar. One often finds sophisticated arguments against an approach that considers city politics and urban life simply as reflection of more general societal and political tendencies. They are related to the popular idea that urban space is not a container or a background for social and political processes but should be thought as an active agent of the various interactions that take place in the city (Massey, 2005). On the other hand, there is a tendency to emphasize the changing configurations of power in the city as evidence that the role of state institutions in many places is diminishing. However conceptually attractive investigating Russian cities as possible sites of autonomous political shifts and specific power configurations might be, the municipal governments’ striking lack of autonomy, the political apathy of the population and the lack of interest in social concerns characteristic of many people put obvious limits on this research strategy. My argument is that the numerous links that exist between the Russian government’s aggressive and isolationist foreign policy and its strongly hierarchically managed domestic affairs produced very ambivalent results. Imperial pomp, the attempts to raise people’s national consciousness and self-esteem through aggressive rhetoric combined with the government’s obvious inability to limit corruption, when applied to the local urban circumstance, produced disappointment and resentment, paired with hostility and aggression directed toward various “others.”

### **“There is nothing we can be respected for”: “Gazeta.ru” On-line Forum on Xenophobia**

On-line discussions, TV talk shows, and sociological polls of the attitudes toward migration and ethnic minorities show the growing influence of nationalist discourses inscribing the boundaries of who belongs to, and who is excluded from, the Russian nation. However, it is relatively seldom that critical opinions expressed both by newcomers and non-Russian residents of Russian cities with regard to Russians and the politics of the Russian government enter the public discourse. For this reason, the on-line forum that the popular Internet newspaper *Gazeta.ru* organized in the aftermath of the events in Kondopoga<sup>3</sup>, give a valuable opportunity, first, to make sense of the exchange of opinions that was triggered by a dramatic political event and, second, to enter a dialogical space of sorts because, in one’s everyday life, one rarely witnesses ethnicity-based “quarrels,” *Gazeta.ru* created a space in which conflicts and dissatisfactions

could be openly discussed (although not many solutions were found). One can even go as far as to say that, in the current absence of meaningful political life in Russia, *Gazeta.ru* came close to having made one tiny example of what political philosophers call a competitive or agonistic public sphere as opposed to, first, the private sphere (Arendt, 1958) and, second, to a Habermasian neutral consensus-oriented public sphere (Benhabib, 1988; Mouffe, 2002). An agonistic public sphere is an arena where people who belong to different classes and possess various identities engage each other directly and where discussion and contention can legitimately take place. In online conversations, people variously locate themselves vis-à-vis their government, nation, region, city, and ethnicity, so that their understanding of the Kondopoga conflict and their assessment of the general situation is affected by their local knowledge and their situated reflection on inter-ethnic relations.

Although the Web is generally understood as capable of creating a shared space of debate on the issues of broad concern, it is too often that (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 840)

The 'general interest' is discursively bound by dominant understandings and represents powerful interests while obscuring this particularity and associated exclusions. Further in-depth research of these corporate portal and media sites is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the extent to which excluded voices may be 'entering' these spaces and effectively challenging the terms of debate.

The online fragmentation (to which Dahlberg's article is devoted) is characteristic to the Russian Internet to a great extent. When it comes to representation of ethnic groups, on the one hand, one sees sometimes obscure or heavily commercialized sites<sup>4</sup> while on the other, sites of (sometimes equally obscure) political groups.<sup>5</sup> The very distinction of "dominant" and "counter-" discourses is difficult to draw because of an apparent lack of "general interest intermediaries" (Sunstein 2001, quoted in Dahlberg, 839). National newspapers and TV channels used to work as such but, again, in times of a heavily manipulated media, a lack of trust and interest on the part of people prevents genuinely public forums from developing. What one hears or reads most often is the experts' opinions or exchange. "Non-experts," in a sense, are pushed into the realm of the "new media" where they actively seek and receive practical advice and share experiences. Good coffee-lovers and bicyclists, amateur home decorators and young mothers, cancer patients and "extreme" sport activities fans—to name just a few—interact daily in Russian cyberspace. It is as self-reliant and independent subjects capable of efficiently resolving numerous practical problems or responding to an opinion in someone's blog that they figure most often. On the other hand, their more troublesome attitudes, including the ones on migration, are usually collected in the course of empirical investigations when the experts working in the sociological research institutions oversee large-scale research (like the one I mentioned in the beginning of this paper) through "outsourcing" it, partly with help of their regional colleagues (commercial sociological companies). The obtained results are discussed in the network of experts (Gudkov, 2004; Leonova, 2004; Dubin, 2003). What is missed in this off- and on-line circulation of knowledge and opinions is the *meeting* of different attitudes and the *contestation* of the different experiences of lived diversity, of different people's co-habiting in a town or a city space.

There are 200 opinions that the newspaper published in the Fall, 2007, placed, more or less, in chronological order, so that, going from first to last, a reader can see how the "echo" of the Kondopoga riots get weaker while people's everyday concerns and long-time traumas come to the fore. Significantly, some participants in the forum seem to be traumatized by the decision of the editors to discuss the Kondopoga events under the rubric "Xenophobia." The citizens of that northern town came to the meeting, expressed their outrage at the authorities' indifference in the face of four Russians being killed in course of interethnic conflict, and objected to the numerous alliances among the local administration and Caucasian businessmen based on bribes. Some

mass-media (radio *Echo Moskvy*, for one) used this event as proof of deep-seated Russian xenophobia. So it is not by chance that one of the forum's participants said,

“Why on earth the material titled ‘They introduced a commandant hour in Kondopoga’ was published under the rubric ‘Xenophobia’?! It should be put in the ‘Highlights’ or ‘Society.’ Who decided that murder of the Russian citizens is no more than ‘irrational or excessive fear or hatred towards foreigners or strangers’? Excuse me, Kondopoga is not ‘xenophobia’ but something much more serious.”

Another Kondopoga inhabitant elaborates on that.

“Many people here in Karelia see the main problem not in people's nationalities but in officials' corruption. If ‘buyers’ succeeded in ‘buying’ the officials, they decided the others can be bought as well and that there is nothing we can be respected for. This is the reason why Caucasians despise us. Thank you, fathers of the town and the republic, very much for putting us in this situation. Those from Caucasus behave very arrogantly and pushy. They pay visit to the residents of the individual wooden houses and suggest selling them to them. In case people refuse to do so, the Caucasians pose a threat to put their houses to fire. We are told that those who came from the South are the refugees. I don't believe it. Family of five can live in a nice house with only one breadwinner. What do they live on, those Russian citizens, as our authorities call them? Where do they get that much money?”

Many themes and lines of reasoning are intertwined in this and similar statement. Rational, irrational, pragmatic, and affective dimensions of people's understanding of the situation are lumped together. A rational understanding that underlying the ethnic conflicts is corruption in the local government is paired with the emotionally charged observation, “There is nothing we can be respected for.” Justified questioning of the Caucasians' strategies for improving their living conditions is combined with egalitarian suspicion about their sources of income. Gender contract on which many Caucasian families are based (that only men work while women remain home) is also met with suspicion because a different contract is characteristic of many Russian families with two breadwinners. (I'll come back to this point later.) What I also think expresses itself in this statement is a paternalist attitude; the fathers of the town are sarcastically held responsible for “putting us in this situation.” However, the line that I started this chapter with can, I think, be read as an indication of the author's bitterness in the face of the situation that whether it comes to national or personal achievements, there is not much to be proud of, a source of real accomplishment. This is where all the aggressive media bombardment of the population with the messages of “us” being “the greatest country in the world” shows its utter deficiency. The reason is that whether victory in World War II or rich natural resources are listed as indicators of Russia's greatness, people see that these are not enough, that the way the political system works today is deeply unjust because those living in Kondopoga as well as millions residing elsewhere are still too dependent on their “fathers,” be they national or local ones. I mean not only the unprecedented popularity of a former country's leader but the questionable state in which small business finds itself, the deformed job market, the low salaries of those working in state-subsidized professions and, more generally, the sense of depression that confronts a visitor to almost any Russian town.

**“Did anybody see a Chechen working at a factory?”: Politics of Trade and Employment**

The popular Marxist-Leninist belief that the social and cultural processes could be speeded up has found its expression in what Francine Hirsch calls "state-sponsored evolutionism," a doctrine according to which a necessary phase on the way toward Socialism for the people of Central Asia, Caucasus, Siberia, etc. was nation formation and national consciousness (2005). The belief that everybody, even a member of the most backward community, could "evolve" into a higher being by embracing the Soviet ideology comprised the core of the two-fold Soviet cultural policy that involved the invention of ethnic cultures (including the creation of the alphabet in some cases) and the establishment of a Soviet culture. The Soviet authorities built a supranational centralized state based on the idea of class unity and a number of amenities that promoted modernized Soviet culture (e.g., factories, clubs, libraries, schools, and museums). This differentiated Soviet cultural policy from "classic" colonial ones, which were based on conserving the cultural backwardness of colonized people.

For all groups, except the Russians, nationality was territorialized; one had ethnic rights only within one's own territory. In contrast to non-Russians, Russians enjoyed extraterritorial status in the USSR; they could have led successful professional lives not just in the RSFSR (the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic) but throughout the entire country. They often moved elsewhere out of "their" territory because economically their territory was in some regards weaker than the neighboring republics. That was the price that needed to be paid in order for the country to exist as a whole (Tolz, 2001). Russians were the majority, yet they perceived themselves as underprivileged. They did not have a 'titular' status because the way they were privileged in the Soviet Union and the way other ethnic groups/nationalities were disempowered was rendered invisible and distorted by ideological pronouncements of equality and "friendship of the peoples." Russians were seen by the Soviet authorities as having the mission of bringing advanced industrial technologies and progressive worldviews to the "underdeveloped" people on the margins of the Soviet Empire. Since, in Soviet times, industrialization couldn't give jobs to everybody, Moldavian, Chechen, and Ingush men had to look for jobs in Russia, and they worked mostly in the construction and in the informal economy. Because of the on-going restructurisation of the economy in the former Socialist republic, this tendency retains its force till today. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the structure of migrants' occupations became more complex, although in the common sense perception, it is Tajiks (and other migrants from the Middle Asia) who work in construction, and it is Caucasians who are usually businessmen and traders. The locals, meanwhile, not only remain engaged in industrial labor (often carrying the burden of de-industrialization) but their mobility is drastically limited because of the widening gap in cost of living between the provinces and the big cities. Many perceive themselves as being trapped where they are, with very bleak prospects to better their life situation or working conditions. This is how one informant, residing in a small town in the Urals, describes his family's situation:

How many times have we thought of moving elsewhere where it is more warm, where cultural life is more interesting, where there is a chance to get more interesting job but we won't be able to "convert" the assets that we have where we are (the apartment, the garage, the plot of land and a hut in the collective garden) into something decent if we move to a big city.

As a result, the fact that mobile Caucasians avoid working at factories is sometimes used to question their human worth and the decency of their intentions. For instance, one of the participants of the "Gazeta.ru" forum said,

(Here is) my opinion about the non-locals, about non-Russians. I don't know the reasons but a very few of them works at the factories and in agriculture as workers. For instance, at the plant Rostselmash I never came across a gypsy tribe working at hydraulic press

equipment or a tape of those from Caucasus employed as welders. Most importantly, if you came to this country, be a Rossianin, accept everything and everybody, Russian and non-Russian, as it is and as they are, and don't blame the country where you live, where you now have roots, feel concerned about your country with all your heart without any reservations. May you all be in a good health, peace and well-being.

“Rostselmash” (a plant where this man in vain looked for Gypsy coworkers) is located in Rostov-on-Don and boasts as being one of the five biggest manufactures of harvesters in the world. “We help harvest Bread, this is why every worker should feel responsible for what she/he does [...] thousands of farmers and agricultural workers wait for our harvesters,” - one reads on the plant's Web site. Bread typed with capital B and those “agricultural workers” whom we “help” with what we produce are the popular devices of Soviet-time ideological rhetoric. It emerged from the then unshakable Marxist-Leninist assumptions about the union of the working class and peasants, within which workers played a leading role while peasants, by virtue of their petit bourgeoisie inclinations, were always in need of, at least ideological, “help”. What I find very symptomatic is that while some ideological assumptions seem to retain their force, others are largely forgotten. What sense can one make out of the claim that newcomers don't rush to join the workforce of the few properly functioning Russian plants but prefer to trade goods? Does that mean that tired Soviet slogans about the working class still mean something for people? Or, what they, in fact, do reproduce, is a neoliberal take on the migrants who are allowed in the country but only on the condition that they take the second-rate, mostly manual or otherwise unpopular, jobs? It seems to me that the ideology of economic optimization and restructuring is absorbed by people, and their former fellow citizens are unproblematically seen as a source of cheap labor. But when the migrants' occupations are prestigious and profitable (and when the Russians' role is reduced to being a source of profit for newcomers), anxiety and even anger intrudes. Trade always attracted mobile and resourceful members of the population. 15.2 per cent of those migrants who work in a trade admitted that there are satisfied with their housing conditions and level of living as compared to only 8 per cent of those working in industry, construction, transport, and education (Karachurina, 2005). So part of the Russians' resentment may have something to do with the usual hostility towards those more successful. However, another opinion shows that things are more complicated:

Nobody is against Chechens as an ethnic group or their coming here to work [...] But did anybody see a Chechen working at a factory, teaching at school, working as a tractor-driver on a field? All them are businessmen of sorts. Their behavior reflects this: they behave not as people belonging to a different nationality, this is what our people would tolerate, but they behave as if they belonged to a higher caste.

Arrogance of those from the northern Caucasus, their tendencies to bribe some Russians and to treat others as prey to be deceived or mastered has been often commented upon by Russians. Anecdotal evidence consists of numerous stories about their drug-related activities and selling falsified vodka. In public discourse, their activities are juxtaposed with the on-going discrimination of Russians. In his book, “*Non-Tajik Girls and Non-Chechen Boys*,” a reporter, Dmitrii Sokolov-Mitrisch, collected numerous cases of the criminal acts committed against Russians by foreigners (2007). The author believes that the main source of the conflicts is the Caucasian ethnic communities with their principle of double loyalty: the laws of their own community are considered more important than the laws of the Russian Federation. With this double moral standard they treat people that don't belong to their nationality as second-rate. The support of criminals is characteristic of all their business dealings. Whether or not this has consequences for Russians' finding a place for themselves in the economy remains an open question. In any case, Sokolov-Mitrisch objects to the tendency of silencing cases of discrimination by the authorities against Russians because the charge of “facilitating national

conflict” is applied arbitrarily and often used to punish those who “disobey.” There is, indeed, distortion in the way the media represent the conflicts; as if only Russians were acting as the fascists, and as if only non-Russians were victims of national hatred.

***“They don't listen to what we say because our way of life isn't worthy of following”*: the Politics of Emotion**

It is enough to take even a brief look at a crowd in Moscow’s center to be struck by the variety of appearances, from “respectable” to bohemian, from low-key to conspicuously ostentatious, and from unassertive to shoutingly kitschy. The social and cultural differences in the patterns of consumption are there but, rather than being related directly to one’s class or status, they express innovative forms of personal and group identity, new kinds of social experiences. People, especially the young, are seen in public places flirting and eroticizing everything they can cast their gaze on. They actively experiment with their appearance, sexuality, and lifestyles. Unfortunately, too often the excesses of contemporary Russian society and culture(s) come to the fore, whether one deals with “the glamour” in all its endless varieties or with the weakened cultural energy, i.e. when the tendency towards simplified cultural consumption is prevalent. Russians actively discuss their current mores, with the predominant evaluation that “everybody and everything can be bought for money.” However, voices expressing “moral traditionalism,” whether they come from the Orthodox Church or from conservatives, are seldom heard. In this atmosphere of general moral uncertainty, gossiping and sharing prejudices about the others becomes, however perverse, a way of dealing with one’s own questionable moral standing. A disdain for conspicuous mass-consumption and moral corruption sometimes expresses itself in the moral charges directed against others. In course of online discussions, although the discourse of “state-sponsored evolutionism” that I mentioned earlier allows Russians to give themselves a higher rank on the cultural ladder, they immediately face others questioning this pretence and showing contempt for the excesses of the members of their ethnic group.

One of the most emotionally charged exchanges that “Gazeta.ru” xenophobia forum facilitated is on the personal autonomy of women. In one participant’s judgment,

“The Caucasians conceive of personal autonomy as lack of discipline (it shows itself in their attitude towards Russian women). But the Western women do have personal autonomy. This means that Caucasians, isolated by the mountains and having an inferiority complex because of their small number, will always be against personal autonomy, human rights and against gender equality. Their women are cowed and down trotted, they don’t have voice – this is what we don’t understand. We also don’t understand how a mature man can be so much afraid of their parents’ opinion that he doesn’t actually have his own say in important matters. Is he going to ask his parents whom to vote for at the election booth?[...] All this is an outcome of the tribal social relationships that persist in the mountains.”

The other defends his “tribe” by saying,

“Isn’t it strange to think that belonging to a ‘developed culture’ presupposes that one should ignore his father’s opinion, and if women are spared of listening to obscenities while shopping and dragging heavy bags home, does this mean that this is ‘pre-feudal wilderness’? ‘In the mountains’ a woman is not cowed and down trotted, on the contrary, she is a respected daughter, one man’s wife till her death, her children’s mother, and a bearer of her man’s honor and dignity. All her social connections come through her husband and through her extended family [...] If somebody takes one’s walking around with half-opened butts, bellybutton and breasts as a sign of personal autonomy and if

somebody enjoys when his wife, dressed like this, is stared at and discussed by other men, then I, too, would like to take an advantage of his, so 'personally autonomous' wife.

Ranking various ethnicities along some kind of moral scale has been an age-old preoccupation of people. When my Jewish friend was assaulted on a street, he said to me melancholically, "What else can one reasonably expect from the Russians? When my people were writing books, yours were only beginning climbing the trees." Evoking images of women, family, femininity, and tradition for constructing the positive images of ethnicity or a nation has been used in various forms across time and space. This explains why the above-cited contribution is meant to be intrusive and offensive, as opposed to a putatively objective observation made by the Russian. The charge about Caucasians as underdeveloped mountain people is met with statements that the Russians don't care about their honor, letting their women to live loosely. In both cases, the participants speak about social regulation and practices of the self, on the need to use discipline for the production of gender identity. But more often than not, it is not personal autonomy that concerns people. Consider how in the next statement a complex moral charge directed against those who belong to the "we" group is combined with the demographic discourse that has been heavily promoted by the Russian government as a way to deal with the worsening demographic situation.

Unless Russians understand, why, living in the potentially wealthiest country in the world, they live on the verge of disappearance, all our troubles continue to haunt us. Is it those of different nationality who are guilty that our population decreases annually on 800-900 thousand people? Is it them to blame that our women don't want to give birth to the children and we as men don't want to raise even those children that were born. It is too easy that we divorce our wives and abandon our children. It is among the Russians that the number of single mothers is the highest. In order a boy turned into a real man, he has to have a father capable of setting a good example. An alcoholic and a traitor cannot set this example. How many of us can boast that they can defend their family from intruders? Needless to say, to defend a stranger-Russian from the offenders? Most of us will be passers-by in this situation: "I don't care", -- this is what we too often think. Our children are late back home in the night and we even are afraid to ask where were they? They don't listen to what we say because our way of life isn't worthy of following.

Nearly all informants with whom I conducted interviews commented one way or another, on the disturbing state of community feelings among Russians. Some referred to Russian migrants abroad in the sense that they tend to receive less support from their ethnic group or diasporas than, say, Armenians. Some cited recent cases of disturbances in higher education institution dormitories (where, as a rule, members of ethnic minorities reside in large numbers) during which Tajiks showed a much higher level of social organization than Russians. Some spoke of the unprecedented poverty in the provinces that leads to demoralization. There is one point that I want to make in this regard.

Before post-socialism, it was not the life of the individual but the life and wellbeing of "collectives" or "society" that worked as an ideological means for mobilizing populations. However, human life continues to be used as a resource, continues to be mobilized, and continues to function as a fuel for the economy and a material for politics. To give one example: the Russian state, by paying large subsidies to those who wish to have a second child, hopes to fulfill its ambitions regarding the Siberian and Far Eastern territories, which, supposedly, need to be re-populated. Speaking of populating territories, I recently showed my students Helene Chatelain's documentary on the Gulag.<sup>6</sup> I was amazed by some of the reactions I received. Some of my students said they were "mesmerized" by the grandeur of the scenes of "people conquering

nature." How about the fact, I asked, that it was -50°, that the "conquerors" were barefoot, and that many of them died? Sure, their reply was, but still, wasn't it great that "with their help we managed to develop the new territories?" The seductiveness of grand ideas and the grand scale keeps reproducing itself in new generations.

Commenting on Alan Badiou's provocative statement that the worse Stalinist terror is better than the most liberal capitalist democracy, Slavoj Žižek claims that opening up "space" was one of Stalinism's accomplishments and asks: "Can one imagine a utopian point at which this subterranean level of the utopian Other Space would unite with the positive space of 'normal' social life?" (2004, 513). It seems that one can. Thinking of themselves as good professionals oriented towards normal lives, these students accept the fact that the life of the anonymous subjects of a great empire, their empire, can be used in service to a higher purpose. They imagine themselves inhabiting gated communities where the chance to meet "undesirable elements" is minimal; but it is equally thrilling for them to think of the vast spaces that have been made "ours" by turning hundreds of thousands of people into "undesirable elements" and putting them to work as slaves.

### **“How about being just humans?”: Anti-Racist Rhetoric and the Politics of Knowledge**

Although most of the statements that I recorded during the interviews and found on the Internet forums convey a certain degree of skepticism about the perspectives of the non-problematic coexistence of various nationalities in post-Soviet space, there are some voices that object to putting too much emphasis on one's ethnic origins and dividing each other along the ethnic lines. The arguments that people develop can be roughly divided on four groups: (1) politization of nationalism and ethnicity- and nation-related feelings; (2) evoking the traumas of the past, not as a way to blame each other, but as a source of reconciliation; (3) citing the “hybridity” of most people's ethnic origins, which makes it difficult to draw ethnic boundaries; and, finally, (4) arguing that every ethnic group has “bad” and “good” members.

One woman, a participant of the “Gazeta.ru” forum says,

It seems to me that what matters is one's personality and not nationality: it doesn't matter whether you are Russian, Tatar, Lithuanian or somebody else. If a person is a jerk, he or she will remain such and will keep killing Tajik girls, African-American students, or Jews. I am Russian. I remember being asked to leave by the owner of the store in Czech Republic. It was awfully humiliating. It is not my personal responsibility but I should be ashamed for our presence in the countries that we set free and for Afghanistan. All nations are not innocent; all of them conquered some others or have taken something from others. I am sick of it. How about just being humans who live on Earth and who, as scientists say, originate from as little as seven mothers.

The boundaries of community that this woman draws seem to be different from those that the people I cited earlier are inclined to draw. Through raising the question of national guilt and the contradictory ways by which most cotemporary nations established themselves, she suggests replacing traditional ethnic sensitivities with universal humanitarian claims based on the recognition that all persons are in some significant way the same or at least very similar. It is often implied by many other participants and informants that universal similarities are sufficient to transcend ethnic particularities and that it is counter-productive to “judge the whole nation from a couple of jerks,” as another “Gazeta.ru” participant puts it.

Many people seem to be searching for ways of understanding and practicing social difference that can avoid exclusion. Some argue in favor of more efficient high school education that would introduce students to a peculiar version of Russian multiculturalism (“people are different but all of them are Russian citizens (*rossiane*)”) while some rely on the cultural practices of the pre-revolutionary past.

My grandmother, when I asked her how in her circle people would deal with “the national question” before revolution said that they simply didn’t have this question. It is one’s confession that was on the foreground so that one had to remember when and whom to send greetings (Orthodox Christmas, Catholic Christmas, Yom Kippur or Ramazan). “It was a matter of choosing right friends and keeping the jerks at the distance,” she added.

One can surely object to this person reminding us of religious pluralism that too much in one’s life depends now on the circumstances of not of one’s own choosing; that morality today is more dependent on the spatial relationships with other people and on which, in turn, the power-relations among ethnic majorities and minorities have an obvious impact. At the same time, “there is a vacuum of positive thought while most enforcement structures do use the image of the enemy in order to do business as usual,” as yet another participant says. People seem to be trying to fill this vacuum, but the cultural repertoires and sources of argumentation that they find at their disposal are rather limited.

## Conclusion

The statements and the interviews analyzed here suggest that diverse participants of Gazeta.ru and other Internet forums and my informants think about their differences and similarities with others through frameworks that have been described in the existing theoretical literature as well as the one on urban ethnicities in Russia. On the other hand, they show that, although issues of immigration are definitely at the top of the public agenda, rendering concerns about it solely as an expression of xenophobia is hardly productive. Conventional qualifications of Russians as being hopelessly xenophobic need to be reconsidered in light of the concrete arguments that “non-experts” use to express their everyday anxieties. They do not object to fighting more effectively against exclusion, on the condition that the whole Russian population’s ways of living, thinking, feeling, and, finally, surviving are taken into consideration. This involves accounting for (1) the growing alienation among all levels of power in Russia and its citizens that expresses itself most drastically in the unprecedented level of corruption; (2) the problematization of the “Russian” way of life by both non-Russians and Russians; (3) the distinctive and changing geographical circumstances in which inter-ethnic attitudes arise.

While going through the chorus of controversial opinions expressed, one is also reminded of the contradictions inherent to the discourse on tolerance. When ideas concerning tolerance are produced without reflexive attention to their own cultural specificity and potential lack of universalism, they can, paradoxically, serve to reproduce the same processes of Othering and exclusion they purport to denounce. Groups, worldviews, behaviors, and creeds that do not manifest the same degree of tolerance or openness are liable to be deemed “intolerant,” excluded from the sphere of acceptability, and even branded as barbaric, primitive, irrational, and backward.

For too many today, Russians and non-Russians alike, the allure of acquisition is limited to the basics. One sees immigrants buying chicken skin and pensioners undertaking shopping expeditions to wholesale markets to get the cheapest pasta possible, and one can’t help thinking that a fairer distribution of oil revenues could easily make these people less concerned about the ways in which their co-existence make them unhappy.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger project that, in turn, stems out of series of workshops *Paradoxes of Diversity in the Contemporary World* sponsored by the Kennan Institute for Russian Studies in the summer of 2005 and winter of 2006 in which a group of American and Russian scholars took part. Together with an American anthropologist Michele Rifkin-Fish, I co-directed these workshops and co-edited the book titled *Paradoxes of Diversity in the Contemporary World: Conversations on 'Culture' and 'Tolerance' after the Soviet Union* which is now under review in the Woodrow Wilson Press. I am indebted to Michele for constantly inspiring me with her insight, political passion, and expertise as well as for prompting me to re-think the issues of diversity in a number of challenging ways.

<sup>2</sup> The Soviet Union dealt with ethnic diversity in a manner unique among modern states: while Soviet identity was established as an umbrella form of citizenship, nationality [ *natsional'nost'* ]—the Soviet term for ethnicity—became a central unit of identity at the *sub-state* level. The Soviet state was comprised of political-administrative territories ostensibly dedicated to the members of the particular national groups of the region or republic. There were also personal and communal dimensions of nationality. Nationality was a legal category that defined an individual's status. Yet as Rogers Brubaker has shown, territorial and political identity (institutionalized in national republics) was separate from and often incompatible with personal and ethnocultural identity, because many people in the country did not live in their nationally designated place of residence (or did not have one). Consequently, the Soviet system involved a complex and contradictory system of knowledge and power that at once gave national identity immense importance as a social category, separated it from statehood and citizenship, and controlled the forms of expression it could legitimately take (Brubaker, "Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Eurasia: An institutionalist account," *Theory and Society* ( December 1994), pp. 47-78)

3. <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/kseno/>

4. See, for instance, a following site: (<http://asia.boom.ru/primer.htm>)

5. (<http://www.pravaya.ru/idea>).

6. The documentary *Gulag* (2000). Author: Helene Chatelain: Director: Iossif Pasternak. Producer: Arte France, 13 Produccion. Duration: 4 x 60 min, 2 x 115 min.

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